

A NOTE ON LABELS

BY JUSTICE CHARLES Z. SMITH¹

It is my practice to refer to “persons of color” rather than to “minorities” and to characterize the dominant groupings into African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander and Native American. The following statement on “People of Color” by Ms. Sharon Maeda, Spectra Communications, is worthy of note.

PEOPLE OF COLOR

Although not universally accepted, we use this description as more accurate and less offensive than *minority*.

The media rarely use *people of color*, and the federal government uses *minority*.

AFRICAN AMERICAN

From the civil rights movement of the 1960s came *black*, which replaced *Negro* and *colored*. Then *Afro-American* more correctly identified them with their cultural roots. Many continued to use *Black* with a capital *B*. For some ten years now, national leaders have been using *African American*, with or without a hyphen, which parallels Asian American and Native American.

ASIAN/PACIFIC AMERICAN

This term describes Americans whose ancestors immigrated from China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, India, Pakistan, and other Asian Countries. The federal government has combined these Americans with those from the Pacific Islands. Many community groups use *Asian/Pacific* as an all-inclusive umbrella word. Each ethnic group, however, will prefer a term like *Chinese American* or *Filipino American* within an ethnic-specific context to differentiate its unique culture and history.

LATINO

While not universally accepted, this term is more positive than *Hispanic*. The federal government provided the umbrella term *Hispanic* to apply to people from Spain and its former colonies, including Mexico, Central America, parts of South America and the Caribbean. *Latino* addresses the cultural history rather than emphasizing the colonial powers that dominated their people. The largest Latino groups in the United States are Mexican Americans, or Chicanos (male) and Chicanas (female), Puerto Ricans, Salvadorans, Cubans, and Dominicans. Latinos may be black, white, or Native American Indian.

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NATIVE AMERICAN

This term perhaps most accurately describes the original inhabitants of this country. They are indeed native. Many groups, however, now prefer to call themselves Indian or American Indian. But, as one national leader said, “We call ourselves Indians, but you call us Native Americans to remind yourselves that we are the first citizens of this country.”

This category includes Alaska Natives (Inuit and Aleut) as well as native tribes in the lower 48 states. While not categorized by the government in this way, many Native Hawaiians identify with this group rather than the Asian/Pacific category to which they are assigned.